

TEACHER ISOLATION AND THE NEW REFORM

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Educational researchers have rediscovered the critical role teachers play in shaping the school experience of today's youth. Lee Shulman, for example, concludes that, in matters of instructional policy,

the teacher must remain the key. The literature on effective schools is meaningless, debates over educational policy are moot, if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their functions well. No microcomputer will replace them, no television system will clone and distribute them, no scripted lessons will direct and control them, no voucher system will bypass them.¹

This reaffirmation of teachers has been a leading factor in the development of recent strategies for school improvement. The reports by the Carnegie Task Force² and the Holmes Group³ are two prominent examples of proposals aimed specifically at problems within the teaching profession. These reports are significant in that they have helped place teaching squarely at the center of current educational policy and debate.

The focus of this article—teacher isolation—has remained largely in the shadows of this "new reform" movement. Nevertheless, the isolation of teachers should be of primary concern to policymakers for at least two reasons. First, past research indicates that isolation is a widespread characteristic of professional life in schools. Second, because isolation restricts opportunities for professional growth, it represents a potential barrier to the implementation of reform initiatives.

My purpose in this article is to critically examine the nature of teacher isolation. First, I will identify two common perspectives drawn from the research on teacher isolation and show how each perspective is based on a

¹Lee S. Shulman, "Autonomy and Obligation: The Remote Control of Teaching," in *Handbook of Teaching and Policy*, ed. Lee S. Shulman and Gary Sykes (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 504

²Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared. Teachers for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986)

³The Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group, Michigan State University, 1986).

different view of what it means to teach. Second, I will offer an alternative perspective developed from the findings of a recent qualitative study of secondary classroom teaching. This alternative perspective highlights the conservation functions that isolation serves within the overall ecology of teaching. It is particularly useful in understanding why past attempts to “de isolate” teachers have often failed. Finally, I will argue that an improved understanding of teacher isolation calls into question some of the basic assumptions that underlie professionalism and approaches to professional development in education.

PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER ISOLATION

Isolation in the teaching profession is something of a paradox. On the one hand, classrooms are crowded places in which to carry on one’s daily work. Secondary teachers, for example, see an average of 121 students per day.⁴ Although elementary teachers work with a smaller number of students, Philip Jackson’s early research indicated that these teachers engage in as many as 1,000 interpersonal interactions each day,⁵ and there is little reason to assume this number has dropped in recent years.⁶ In *Life in Classrooms*, Jackson characterizes the teacher as gatekeeper, supply sergeant, traffic manager, and official timekeeper in describing an occupation that makes heavy interpersonal demands on its practitioners.⁷ Nevertheless, Seymour Sarason has described teaching as a “lonely” profession, calling attention to teachers’ lack of opportunities for discussing their work with other school personnel.⁸ A case in point is Ernest House’s recollection of his first year of teaching:

... I was entirely alone. There was no senior partner in the firm from whom I could solicit advice on my first case. There was no fellow doctor to whom I could talk about what new treatments to try out since what I was doing wasn’t working. There was no older professor who would coauthor an article with me and help me get started publishing. Professionally I was alone.⁹

Other studies indicate that the collegial isolation described by House is common to the work experiences of novice and veteran teachers alike.¹⁰ Moreover,

⁴C. Emily Feistritzer, *The American Teacher* (Washington, DC: Feistritzer Publications, 1983), p. 11.

⁵Philip W. Jackson, “Teacher-Pupil Communication in the Elementary Classroom: An Observational Study” (paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 1965).

⁶Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller, *Teachers, Their World, and Their Work* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984).

⁷Phillip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

⁸Seymour B. Sarason, et al., *Psychology in Community Settings: Clinical, Educational, Vocational, Social Aspects* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), 74–97.

⁹Ernest R. House and Stephen D. Lapan, *Survival in the Classroom* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1979), p. 16.

¹⁰See Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); John I. Goodlad, *A Placed Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984); Gertrude H. McPherson, *Small Town Teacher* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

although isolation does not uniformly characterize all schools,¹¹ it is by no means restricted to particular types of schools or particular levels of education.¹²

These findings hold special significance for school reform because teaching (compared to the work of other professionals) is a highly ambiguous task, and because isolation has a direct bearing on professional development. Dan Lortie, for example, refers to restricted opportunities for feedback in accounting for the lack of a technical knowledge base in teaching,¹³ and Sarason links isolation to the absence of shared practical knowledge.¹⁴ Isolation has also been used to explain the minimal-to-nonexistent influence of research-based information on teacher decision making.¹⁵

This research reflects two different conceptual orientations to defining the basic nature of teacher isolation. The first and most common orientation defines isolation as a condition under which teachers work. This view brings into focus characteristics of the teacher's work environment and the opportunities, or lack of opportunities, the teacher has for interacting with colleagues. Much of the survey and observational research on teacher isolation shares this perspective. Dan Lortie's research, for example, identifies isolation as a product of institutional characteristics firmly grounded in the historical development of public schools.¹⁶ Specifically, Lortie cites two factors contributing to isolation. First, the "egg-crate" architecture and cellular organization of schools reinforce divisions that physically separate teachers. This point of view is supported by communication research indicating that proximity alone is a strong determinant of interpersonal interaction.¹⁷ Second, historically high rates of teacher turnover and demographic changes in school enrollments require that teaching be organized in such a way as to make replacement, expansion, or reduction of the teaching force easier. From an organizational perspective, then, as long as teachers function as relatively independent units, schools have greater flexibility in coping with the loss of experienced teachers

¹¹See, for example, Judith W. Little, "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success" *American Educational Research Journal*, 19 (Fall 1982) 325-340

¹²John I. Goodlad, *A Placed Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), pp. 186-188

¹³Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 69-73

¹⁴Seymour B. Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1982), pp. 132-133.

¹⁵Richard C. Williams and Adrienne Bank, "Uses of Data to Improve Instruction in Local School Districts: Problems and Possibilities" (Washington, DC: National Institute of Education, 1981)

¹⁶Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 14-16; Dan C. Lortie, "Teacher Status in Dade County: A Case of Structural Strain?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, 67 (April 1986): 568-575.

¹⁷See, for example, Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Kurt Back, *Social Pressures in Informal Groups* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950); Dean C. Barnlund and Carroll Harland, "Proximity and Prestige as Determinants of Communication Networks," in *Interpersonal Communication Survey and Studies*, ed. Dean C. Barnlund (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 108-118

and the growth and decline of student enrollments over time. In short, a high degree of teacher interdependence would obstruct efficient school management.

Lortie's analysis is meant to explain how conditions of work restrict collegial interaction. It locates the sources of isolation in commonplace characteristics of the school. Implicit in this perspective is an assumption that the school environment can be defined independent of how teachers experience that environment. Regardless of teacher perceptions, the milieu of teaching offers only so many opportunities for collegial contact. The realization of these opportunities—the number of times a teacher engages in collegial interaction—can be determined in absolute terms. Teachers are thus viewed as reactive to the physical and social "realities" of their workplace. The teachers' assessment and interpretation of classroom events, their conceptual mapping of professional experience, and the meaning of that experience is put out of focus.

The second orientation that has guided research avoids this bias by defining teacher isolation as a psychological state rather than as a condition of work. This orientation locates the workplace inside the individual as it is created and continually recreated through the filtering and processing of information.¹⁸ Thus, isolation depends more on how teachers perceive and experience collegial interaction than it does on the absolute amount of interaction in which they are involved.

John Goodlad's research has helped document teacher isolation from this perspective. In reviewing data from a sample of 1,350 elementary and secondary teachers, Goodlad found that

... approximately three quarters of our sample at all levels of schooling indicated that they would like to observe other teachers at work. In general, teachers themselves perceived their awareness of one another, communication, and mutual assistance not to be strong ... Finally, teachers perceived that they and their colleagues were not deeply involved in resolving schoolwide problems—a finding that agrees with our findings on their in-service education activities.¹⁹

These conclusions clearly support Lortie's findings cited earlier in this section. However, it is important to note that Goodlad's language reflects an interest in how teachers themselves perceive their isolation, and thus his research at least implicitly acknowledges the interpretive dimensions of teaching. From this perspective, isolation transcends the immediate physical and social environment of the school. Sarason makes a similar point in writing about the nature of work:

¹⁸Bo Hedberg, "How Organizations Learn and Unlearn," in *Handbook of Organizational Design*, ed. P. C. Nystrom and W. H. Starbuck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 3–27.

¹⁹John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 188.

In making a distinction between a specific job or a task, on the one hand, and work, on the other, one concedes that "working" is a more complex and differentiated experience than "performing a task," and is not bounded by space or time. The experience of work is comprised of people, events, and relationships far afield, in a literal sense, from the physical arena of work.²⁰

This distinction between performance and experience sophisticates our understanding of isolation by placing it within the context of how teachers make sense of their work. It allows us to recognize that what one teacher or group of teachers regards as isolation, others may see in terms of individual autonomy and professional support. Moreover, the same teachers may regard identical characteristics of their workplace in quite different ways. Consider, for example, the physical architecture of the school. Teachers may view self-contained classrooms as both a barrier to collegial interaction *and* as a way of protecting classroom activities against interruptions and distractive influences. Thus, the four walls of the classroom can be interpreted in terms of both isolation and insulation.

Although this second orientation broadens our understanding of teacher isolation, it also introduces its own forms of bias. By defining isolation as a psychological state, it locates this problem within the teacher. Doing so creates a temptation to "blame the victim" by assuming that it is the teacher who needs to be changed and not the school. Thus, isolation becomes one more problem laid at the teacher's doorstep. This would seem unwise in that it neglects characteristics of the school and classroom environment that may need reform regardless of teacher perceptions.

Each of the orientations considered above offers a different perspective on the sources of teacher isolation. The first orientation locates isolation within the workplace. The second orientation locates isolation within the teacher. Neither orientation diminishes the potentially adverse effects of isolation on professional development. Nevertheless, both indicate the need for an alternative perspective, one that allows us to bridge these two orientations and thus establish an improved foundation for understanding the teacher's work.

ISOLATION RECONSIDERED: A CASE STUDY

To develop this alternative perspective, I will examine isolation within the context of a qualitative study I conducted recently on adaptive teaching strategies.²¹ The aim of this study was to explore how teachers manage day-to-day classroom instruction. In particular, the study assumed a dual focus on the shared conditions under which teachers work and the routine strategies they develop in response to these conditions.

²⁰Seymour B. Sarason, *Work, Aging, and Social Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 5.

²¹David J. Flinders, "What Teachers Learn From Teaching: Educational Criticisms of Instructional Adaptation" (doctoral dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University, June 1987).

The fieldwork for this study was carried out in two high schools, one serving an upper-middle-class, professional community, and the other serving a working-class population. Six teachers (three at each of the two schools) volunteered as research participants. I observed each of these teachers throughout their school day for five consecutive days. I also conducted a series of taped interviews with each teacher over a period of several months.

Early observations and interviews revealed that colleagues and supervisors seldom played a significant role in the daily work experience of these six teachers. For example, it was not uncommon for participating teachers to have only minimal contact with other teachers throughout their work week and no direct contact with school administrators beyond an occasional nod or "Hello" as they passed one another in the hallways. One teacher offered a typical response when I asked who she talks to about her work. "Anyone who will listen, mostly my friends and family." Another teacher found so few opportunities to discuss his teaching with others that he regarded our interviews, in his words, "as therapeutic."

These observations echo much of the research cited earlier. They also reinforced my initial perception of isolation as a shared condition under which teachers carry out daily classroom instruction. As Lortie suggested, the cellular structure of each school did physically separate teachers from their colleagues. With only one exception (to be discussed), all participating teachers taught alone in self-contained classrooms throughout their work day. Moreover, all six teachers displayed a strong tendency to describe their work in terms of tasks that do not involve collaboration with other teachers. "It's a lot of doing and thinking and preparing," one teacher noted when asked to describe his work:

I arrive in the morning, and either have things lined up in here to staple, correct papers, do some typing, or go through my folders and sometimes I get things on the blackboard. But, it's mainly preparing for the day ahead. Sometimes I'll get the VCR and set it up, if I'm going to be using it that day, or I'll check in books. At some point, I walk down to the main office and get my attendance sheets and daily bulletin, which I then read over and file. Then I kind of go through my mind for periods one, three, and four—just how I'm going to block out each class. I'll get books or any materials I need from the office here or from the back of the classroom, and lay those out. Then, as I say, any time left over I turn to correcting papers.

This tendency to describe teaching in terms of tasks that are typically performed without collegial assistance suggests professional norms that encourage teachers to accept isolation as inherent to the nature of their work.²²

As the study progressed, however, it became increasingly difficult to explain isolation simply as one of the physical and social conditions of teach-

²²Lortie uses the phrase "live and let live" in summarizing teaching norms of collegial interaction in *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 195.

ing The teachers I observed not only accepted their relative isolation *but actively strove to maintain it*. At those points in the day when teachers had the greatest discretion over their use of time (during lunch breaks and preparation periods), they typically went out of their way to avoid contact with others Only two of the six participating teachers, for example, regularly ate lunch in the faculty lunchroom, and those two who did join their colleagues did not, at least during my observations, use this time for discussing issues relevant to their work. Furthermore, all six participating teachers used their classrooms as sanctuaries during breaks as well as before and after school, remaining alone in their rooms to prepare lessons instead of working in their department offices where collegial interaction would have been more available.

One participant, who teaches four classes back-to-back each morning and thus sees more than 120 students in less than four hours, explained why she eats lunch alone in her classroom: "By 11:45, I just don't need to be with other people." Another teacher described his preparation period as "quiet time, which I'm very reluctant to give up." These comments indicate that the interpersonal demands of teaching may take a heavy toll on a teacher's desire to seek additional interpersonal contact outside the classroom. Yet, perhaps more important in explaining the self-imposed nature of isolation are the practical rather than interpersonal demands under which teachers work. In order to fully understand these practical demands, it is useful to consider classroom teaching within a broader context.

More so than other occupations, teaching is an open-ended activity. If time and energy allowed, lesson plans could always be revised and improved, readings could always be reviewed again, more text material could always be covered before the end of the term, students could always be given more individual attention, and homework could always be graded with greater care. As one teacher in the study noted, "I wish I could go twenty-four hours a day—give a paper, correct it, bring it back the next day for all five classes. I think that's the way students learn. But, you know, that's physically impossible." Because instructional demands typically surpass available resources, the teacher's work is never finished in any definitive sense. Teachers may thus view themselves as engaged in a relentless pursuit toward an ever-receding horizon. Another teacher, in discussing the practical tasks of his work, concluded:

I don't know how else to describe it. It's like chasing a tiger around and around a tree. The faster you run, the faster the tiger runs. You can never quite catch up, and you can't slow down either because you're not always sure whether you're chasing the tiger or the tiger's chasing you.

Preoccupied with "tiger chasing," this teacher is likely to view collegial interactions as both a distraction and a potential threat to his professional survival. During one of our interviews, he commented, "If I weren't talking with you right now, I'd be at my desk correcting papers from fourth period. And I have a couple of assignments coming in tomorrow. So it's right around the clock."

Similarly, when I began a day of observations of another teacher, she greeted me with the comment, "Sorry, I can't talk this morning; I've only got 10 minutes to read this chapter." These remarks clearly suggest a tension between collegiality and the task demands of instruction. A fourth teacher in the study succinctly summed up the situation: "The teachers here don't really talk to one another, they don't have time."

Because time and energy are scarce commodities in the overall ecology of teaching, study participants were prone to evaluate collegial interaction in terms of its direct and immediate impact on their ability to complete instructional tasks. For example, one teacher in the study was active in his local teachers' association early in his career but says, "I gave that up when I realized that it did nothing to help my teaching." Another teacher spoke with discouragement in describing his past efforts to work with other teachers on school-wide committees. He concluded:

Now I generally refuse any committee assignments because I feel it's a waste of time and effort. There's no personal satisfaction because the parties that should see results, or that could affect a better atmosphere for teaching, aren't interested or can't effectively move in those areas

Still another teacher took a similarly pragmatic stance toward his interactions with school administrators. When I asked what administrators and other school personnel could do to better support his instruction, he replied simply "What they do best is just stay out of my way."

Self-imposed isolation to some degree characterized the work experience of all six teachers who participated in the study. However, I did observe one notable exception to this general pattern, an exception worth describing because in many ways it proves the rule. John Hargrove,²⁵ a member of the English department, team teaches one of his five classes. This class is designed to prepare a group of eight students to compete against teams from other high schools in the Academic Decathlon (a competition comprised of examinations in 10 subject areas ranging from physics to fine arts). John coteaches this course with Mark Reese, a fellow English teacher, and the two men have developed a close working relationship. They meet almost daily in order to plan lessons and discuss their coaching strategies. Moreover, the broad scope of the curriculum often requires them to consult with other teachers outside the English department.

It is not simply the relatively high degree of collaborative effort that marks the uniqueness of this teaching experience. First, the recent success of the Academic Decathlon team in county and statewide competitions has generated a great deal of positive public recognition for the school. Further, the strong academic focus of the program is highly valued by the local community this school serves. For these reasons, the Academic Decathlon course receives a

²⁵Pseudonyms are used for all teachers who participated in the study

great deal of financial and moral support. Second, the small enrollment of this course (eight students) significantly reduces instructional tasks such as maintaining discipline, taking roll, and grading student assignments. John admits he originally accepted the assignment to coteach the course because, in his words, "It got me out of correcting one more set of 30 essays." Given reduced instructional demands, strong support, and wide recognition, John and Mark find themselves in the unusual situation of being able to make a substantial investment in their collegiality.

In contrast, the work experience of many teachers is defined by large classes, limited support, and districtwide fiscal retrenchment. Under these conditions, the teachers who participated in this study exhibited a strong inclination to organize the daily routines of their work in ways that prevented collegial interaction. Where, when, and how they chose to work did not bring them together with their colleagues, but rather separated them from each other. An outcome of these routines, therefore, was to minimize the practical and interpersonal demands that accompany collegiality. In this light, isolation can be seen not simply as a condition of work, but also as an effective strategy that allows teachers to conserve scarce occupational resources.

As a conservation strategy, isolation is certainly not unique to teaching, and perhaps this perspective is most readily understood by reflecting on our own work experience. Over time, we establish daily routines that necessitate both collegial interaction and periods of independent work. Yet it is not uncommon to respond to increased job demands by closing the office door, canceling luncheon appointments, and "hiding out" in whatever ways we can. We do not attribute our motives for such behavior to naturally conservative personality traits or to malevolent or unprofessional regard for our colleagues. On the contrary, it is professional norms that dissuade us from sacrificing our commitment to job responsibilities even when such a sacrifice can be made in the name of collegiality.

Isolation is an adaptive strategy for teachers because it protects the time and energy required to meet immediate instructional demands. In general, such conservation strategies reflect what has been described as a "practicality ethic" in teaching.²⁴ The main point, however, is that this perspective on isolation underscores its functional utility. Isolation may thus be understood not as a problem in need of redress, but rather as part of the teacher's solution to the practical dilemmas of providing classroom instruction on a day-to-day basis. This "solution" stems from a highly professional motive: to provide the best instruction possible. For those teachers working with scarce resources and heavy instructional demands at least, isolation from colleagues may be essential to maintaining some reasonable level of instructional quality.

²⁴See, for example, Walter Doyle and Gerald A. Ponder, "The Practicality Ethic in Teacher Decision-Making," *Interchange*, 8 (1977-78), 1-11

This view provides a basis for understanding teacher isolation as an adaptive work strategy. It is grounded on the assumption that teaching is a transactional process in which the teacher is neither completely autonomous nor entirely dependent upon his or her work environment. Rather, the experience of teaching derives its meaning and logic from teacher-environment interaction. Thus, isolation must be understood as a product of dual considerations. On the one hand, isolation is adaptive to characteristics of the school environment (large classes, open-ended demands, scarce resources, and so forth). On the other hand, it originates and is maintained by the manner in which teachers assess instructional priorities and establish day-to-day work routines. In short, this perspective puts into focus both the teaching environment and how teachers make sense of their work within it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL REFORM

I have suggested that isolation can be understood as adaptive to the immediate demands of classroom teaching. The adaptive characteristics of isolation, however, do not resolve its highly problematic nature. Task demands such as reviewing assignments, planning lessons, keeping track of attendance, and grading homework not only isolate teachers from their immediate colleagues, but also eliminate opportunities for them to expand their subject-matter knowledge and further develop expertise regarding the content of their instruction. Paradoxically, the long-term effects of isolation undermine the very instructional quality that this work strategy is intended to protect.

In one sense, this brings us back to where the analysis began—with isolation viewed as a barrier to professional development and school reform. Nevertheless, by recognizing that isolation may serve to ensure professional survival, we are now in a better position to understand why past attempts to “de-isolate” teachers have often run aground.

Organizational approaches to reform have generally viewed teacher isolation as a condition of work. This view has led to such tactics as removing the classroom walls that physically separate teachers, establishing team-taught courses in an effort to generate greater work interdependence, and creating teacher centers as focal points for increased professional dialogue. Although these tactics have fostered opportunities for collegial interaction, they often increase the immediate demands of providing day-to-day classroom instruction. In the absence of available resources for meeting these increased demands, many teachers have come to view such reforms as a major source of frustration.

Teacher-oriented approaches to reform have viewed isolation as a psychological process and thus have turned to staff development activities as a vehicle for training teachers in such areas as interpersonal communication and social competence.²⁵ Such reform efforts focus on developing skills, as

²⁵See, for example, William V. Walley and Joseph P. Stokes, “Self-Help Support Groups for Teachers Under Stress” (Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1981).

opposed to providing opportunities for collegial interaction. An assumption underlying this perspective is that a lack of performance (the teacher's failure to engage in collegial interaction) indicates a lack of ability. This assumption may or may not be valid. Yet in either case, "self-improvement" activities tend to increase the practical demands on teachers and may again, therefore, be viewed by teachers as a threat to their professional survival.

More recent proposals for reform, such as peer coaching²⁶ and teacher mentoring,²⁷ represent a blending of organizational and teacher-oriented perspectives. What these reforms have to gain from viewing isolation as a work strategy concerns the practical resources necessary to providing classroom instruction. Any reform that increases instructional demands but fails to provide compensating resources is likely to be perceived by teachers as simply impractical and unrealistic. Under these conditions, reform must be imposed from the outside, and that has rarely proved to be an effective approach to school improvement.

The research cited previously suggests at least one practical implication that may be developed from understanding teacher isolation as an adaptive strategy. Consider, for example, that much of our thinking about management and leadership roles in education is now guided by visions of teacher change. Policymakers, administrators, and curriculum specialists have become increasingly sensitive to program implementation and the role teachers play in this process. Given this reawakened concern for what happens at the classroom level, those promoting change have increasingly defined their work in terms of persuading teachers to adopt a particular instructional method or curriculum framework. This reflects, to use Everett Roger's term, an "innovation-oriented" approach to reform in which primary emphasis is placed on defining the characteristics of a proposed change.²⁸

Nevertheless, the observations reported here suggest an alternative, "user-oriented" approach. This approach shifts the emphasis from the innovation itself to those responsible for making use of it. Educational leaders who assume a user-oriented approach would define their work not primarily in terms of teacher change, but rather in terms of supplying teachers with the resources necessary to their work. This is by no means an easy task. Discovering what resources are appropriate, when, and how they can be provided requires imagination and a great deal of sensitivity to the ecology of classroom teaching.

²⁶See, for example, Beverly Showers, "Teachers Coaching Teachers," *Educational Leadership* 42 (April 1985) 43-48, Petra Munro and Jack Elliott, "Instructional Growth Through Peer Coaching," *Journal of Staff Development* 8 (Spring 1987) 25-28

²⁷See, for example, Judy Arin Krupp, "Mentoring: A Means by Which Teachers Become Staff Developers," *Journal of Staff Development* 8 (Spring 1987): 12-15, Larry B. Godley, Donald R. Wilson, and Beverly J. Klug, "The Teacher Consultant Role: Impact on the Profession," *Action in Teacher Education* 8 (Winter 1986-87): 65-73

²⁸Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 3d ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1983), pp. 92-112

In some cases, these resources may take the form of opportunities for collegial interaction or training in the skills required for such interaction. In other cases, however, first establishing a reserve of time and energy may be far more fundamental to the improvement of teaching.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The interpretive analysis presented above is an attempt to move beyond conceptions of teacher isolation as a condition of work or as a psychological state of mind. Specifically, it suggests that under the practical demands of providing classroom instruction, teachers organize their work in ways that prevent or restrict collegial interaction.

This view of isolation as a work strategy also highlights a common set of assumptions that underlie recent reform proposals for increasing the professionalism of classroom teachers. In a broad sense, professionalism has been a recurrent theme in the new reform movement.²⁹ The Holmes Report, for example, identifies the professional stature of teachers as "the central issue in the improvement of teaching."³⁰ The Carnegie Report represents similar concerns; its specific recommendations include creating a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, increasing teacher autonomy and accountability, introducing career advancement opportunities, strengthening the subject-matter preparation of teachers, developing a professional curriculum for graduate degree studies, and increasing teachers' salaries.³¹

Implicit in such proposals—and in much of the conventional research on teaching—is an idealized view of professionals as autonomous decision makers who progress through their careers in a steady, uninterrupted ascent toward increasing status and greater occupational rewards. As professionals, these individuals possess a relatively well-defined body of knowledge that differentiates them from other professionals. They also possess the skills necessary to apply this knowledge in problem-solving activities. Donald Schon has labeled this perspective the model of "technical rationality." He notes that this model has had a powerful influence on how we think about professionals. He also questions its key assumptions regarding the knowledge base and instrumental rationality of professional practice.³² In the field of education, Schon's work is supported by recent research on the cultures of teaching,

²⁹Lee S. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching. Foundations of the New Reform, *Harvard Educational Review*, 57 (February 1987): 1–22

³⁰The Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group, Michigan State University, 1986), p. 61

³¹Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986)

³²Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983)

and, in particular, research on female teachers' perceptions of their careers.³³ This research has begun to suggest how conventional views of professionalism may be inappropriate to the work experience of classroom teachers.

Conventional views of professionalism, nevertheless, continue to serve as a guiding metaphor for current reform in the areas of teacher education and school policy. Through advanced training and enlightened school management, we appear intent on making teachers more like other professionals. Yet, in recognizing that isolation functions as a work strategy, we are able to see the loneliness of teaching as a potentially undesirable consequence of the teacher's professional status. This brings into focus the dark side of professionalism as a reform metaphor. In particular, it may help turn our attention from models of technical rationality to such issues as how teachers are able to maintain a sense of community and interconnectedness with the ecology of classroom life and with the traditions of their occupation. C. A. Bowers has recently argued that such concerns have remained largely unexamined because of long standing liberal assumptions regarding the positive nature of change and the basic autonomy of the individual.³⁴ These assumptions, which are fundamental to our ways of thinking about education, have provided the foundation and primary focus for the new reform movement. As a result, teacher isolation has not been targeted as a central concern, even though its influence over the impact of reform efforts is likely to remain strong.

This line of reasoning is not meant to imply that educators and educational leaders must abandon deeply held convictions in order to confront problems of teacher isolation. However, a clear understanding of the sources and consequences of isolation should at least sound a note of caution in our rush to further professionalize teaching. Greater professionalism in certain areas may be both highly desirable and necessary for continued school improvement, but we should not let this blind us to the special circumstances of teaching and the novel ways in which teachers make sense of their work. It is, after all, the uniqueness of teaching, as well as its similarities with other professions, that will determine the success of current reform initiatives

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³³Sharon Feiman-Nemser and Robert E. Floden, "The Cultures of Teaching," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3d ed., ed. Merlin C. Wittrock (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 505-526. See also, The Boston Women's Teachers' Group, "Teaching: An Imperilled Profession," in *Handbook of Teaching and Policy*, ed. Lee S. Shulman and Gary Sykes (New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 261-299.

³⁴C. A. Bowers, *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987).

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